Nonetheless, God Re

Also by Jonathan Bryan

NOT COMPLETE TILL ALL THE NUMBERS ARE RIGHT!

A Life of Love, A Love of Life: Recollections of Our Family (co-authored with Alice Bryan Juhan and Mary Bryan Fuller)

CrossRoads: Musings on a Father-Son Pilgrimage (co-authored with Alex Bryan)

Nonetheless, God Re

What A Yellow Lab Taught Me
About Retrieval Spirituality

Jonathan Bryan

Nonetheless Imprints

Alexandria, Virginia

Nonetheless, God Retrieves Us

What A Yellow Lab Taught Me About Retrieval Spirituality

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While I insist on the copyright to this work, I also hope that readers will use it freely in helping others learn from the Bible.

I ask only that such use recognize the work I have done to

develop these ideas.

NOT READY YET

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Nonetheless Imprints

Alexandria, Virginiaa

For

Patch, Tippy, Charlie Brown, Grendel, Duff, Sambo,

Andy, Lucy, Jessie, Sophie, Smokey, and Jocko—

master teachers for all who would learn

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Thank you…

—to Judy for her boundless patience, laugh-a-minute companionship, and steadfast support;

—
to all the parishioners and friends who have appreciated Jocko, our yellow

—to Ian Roberts, whose consults helped keep me on track;

—
to Martha Glennan, who asked the hard questions, like, “What are you tryi

—to Susan and Charlie Walker, who guided me out
of harm’s way on some nuances;

—
and to Alex Bryan, our son, who labored through the drafts as my con

First Quandary

Evidently, Not All Is Well: What Seems to

Life Mixes Splendid Things with Not-So-Splendid.

Sometimes the Splendid Is Harmonious, Sometimes Less So.

Sometimes the Not-So-
Splendid Is Just Annoyance, Sometimes Grave Tragedy.

Anyhow, What's Going On?

Chapter One

Some Thoughts to Get Started

I was about to turn eighteen years old. My mother
and father planned
a celebration for the birthday supper, but they also planned to be out of tow
—
and brought a few friends, who brought a few friends, and so on (you know
built house with a just-
seeded yard, right after a rain. My “guests” tracked in a quantity of mud tha
had a grand time. We all did, right through to the predawn hours.

When I surveyed the wreckage, I decided that this was no place to be when
stead. She insisted, however, and I crept toward much-
deserved con- demnation and shame.

My dread peaked as I walked up the walk and saw my parents labor-
ing with buckets and mops. What do you suppose they did? They did the le
—they sang “Happy Birthday” and greeted me with hugs and kisses.

Lest you imagine them weak or stupid, rest assured that this bon-
homie lasted about five minutes. Then they issued me a mop, a pail, a scru

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evening they gave me a wholehearted birthday celebration, and in the next

If my parents had laid condemnation and shame on me, do you sup-
pose I would have remembered this
episode all these years, let alone bother to mention it?

The Main Ideas and Purposes of this Book

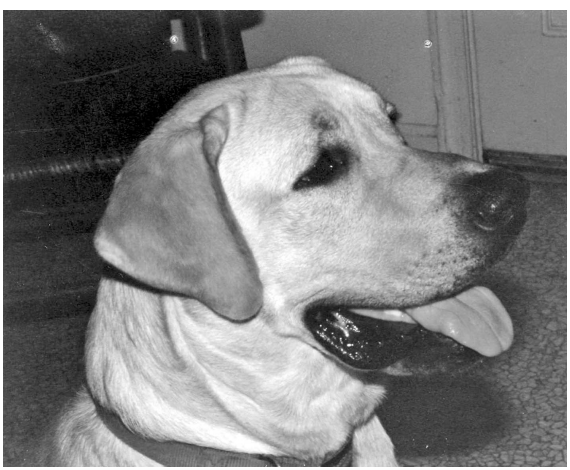
I mention it now because it illustrates the concept expressed in the word no
and they used my irresponsibility as a teaching moment. But the primary fe

The nonetheless response is one of my main concerns in this book. Another

I, too, have had both positive and negative experiences
with spiritual matters. They have led me sometimes to indifference, sometir
ity has been equal parts light and dark, with dawns and dusks in between.

Fortunately, I have been able to read the work of many authorities whose r
helped me in this clarification. I pro-

vide you with notes and bibliography that direct you to some of these studi
your darkness of confusion, frustration, and dismay.



All you agnostics, atheists, Unitarians, Trinitarians, religious liberals frustrated with conservatives, and religious conservatives frustrated with liber- als, read on.
All of you who deplore religion's strange doctrines, hurtful dogmas, divisive disputes, and overzealous extremism, a
who find that

religion hurts more than helps, read on. All of you who thrive on the
giving spirituality, for personal convictions about what's most valuab

We all endure the human predicament; nonetheless, God retrieves us.

God

This troublesome word will get a lot of attention in this book. Gather a

God Retrieves Us

I discovered the concept of retrieval spirituality in watching our wonderful
ment in 1990, the issue of Jessie, our daughter Tucker's elegant black Lab,
champion Lab. Jocko lived with my wife Judy and me until he died in 200
sances of living with Jocko mirrored the nuisances of
life in general.

Most importantly, Jocko's passion for retrieving led me to appreciate Go
"out there," hence, the title and the central idea that I will be explori

In the last chapters, I'll discuss my ideas about retrieval spirituality, and pr
do we do about that?

Chapter Two

Equilibrium: Jocko's Whelping

As Jessie the mommy-
dog labored, Jocko burst forth. She nipped his umbilical, setting him free to

A bulky boy, Jocko emerged as number eight in the litter, the last-
born and the largest. All the pups appeared healthy and hungry. Jessie,

the good mother, licked each clean, then lay still, offering nutrition and sec
they nuzzled her and

suckled warm milk.

It was a primordial image, that box full of potential. It represented for me t

—briefly.

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Chapter Three

Alienation: Jocko’s Yelping

All was well when Jocko the sealed-eyelid whelp arrived as
a harmless little organism. Everything was very peaceful, but that didn't las
dered in to take possession. The wee pup wailed, but the burly guy

ignored her. Jessie ignored her. The other six pups ignored her. In their wo
serving ruled.

In the next few days, the wee pup's exclusion happened over and over. She

After a few weeks, Jessie got tired of sharp little teeth abus-

ing her tender parts, and she became less inclined to
go into the whelp-
ing box. Finally she rebelled altogether; her motherly love had reached its
delivery business, and Tucker took her home, mission fulfilled.

So our two kind women had to fill the feeding void for eight whelps around

these helpless little animals became a nuisance; nonetheless, they cared and

After a while, Tucker and Judy weaned the litter to big pans of a spe-
cially mixed slop thought to be nutritious and delicious. Four pups ra
—the entire pan if possible. All survived with big roly-
poly bellies, sleeping happily for two hours until next mealtime.

In the next few weeks, the eight little pups learned to waddle, then walk, an
nade. They followed me around the fence line. The second time I invited th
the Theologian. He declined.

He plopped down and stared at us on our pointless circuit. I thought, "Her
should actually go somewhere, not around in a circle. "This one may

From Whelp to Yelp

As Jocko grew, he grew obnoxious. If you and I behaved the way young Joc

Jocko was a rambunctious, over-
energized, oversized, rash, brash pain in the neck. Jocko was a friend to all

visitors didn't watch it, he'd mark their shoes in that liquid way dogs claim

At first, he was too small to whack with a newspaper, so we chastened him

responded with his chummy smile, raised ears, arched eye-
brows, and a big wag of his tail that swung his whole rump around. He wa
actually, I can't think of any other assets.

His negatives were pretty serious; nonetheless, we

decided to call his behavior innocently alienating and adopted a policy of d
to the mellow dog part.

Jocko Comes when Called—Sometimes

Some months later,
Jocko and I were walking along our suburban street late at night. I pulled n

All went well, this soul-
warming moment, until an aroma struck Jocko's ready nostrils and
jowls, activating urges that kicked over our

covenant of trust, luring Jocko away from me, nose down, drawn off into th

“But Jocko,” I thought, “we had a deal.
I unleash you, I trust you to stay close, and yet you cave in to this firs

I whispered commands for him to return—now—but Jocko contin-
ued tracking the scent. I chose not to follow him around the neighbor’s hou

Finally Jocko emerged from the shadows. I
whispered cross remarks to him and mused on how readily I break my own
gratification.

Total Depravity

One day Judy and I had to run an errand, and we confined Jocko in the kit
sink cabinet, a wagging tail, a mus-
cular body, huge legs and paws, a massive chest, and part of an enormous
— but no head. The head was in the garbage bag.

I grabbed the newspaper and swatted his rump and spoke stern wo
oh” grin as if to say, caught again, or, rather, sorry again, or, rather,

Temptation had again trumped covenant. I remembered the old joke
—
Friend: “What, another new suit?” Shopper: “Satan made me do it.” F

Most of us come factory equipped with bipolar conscience—
dread going into wrongdoing, guilt coming out. But Jocko’s conscience lack
gratification, not compliance, both motivated and rewarded him. Jocko’s ha
in-the- cookie-
jar attitude showed the limited extent of canine remorse. Maybe he was, in
turn, or a conversion from depravity to decency. That’s what his body langu
—
every time. It seemed sincere each time, but it never had much holding pow
resembled Teflon more than Velcro.

After I tidied up Jocko’s garbage-
strewn muzzle, gave him a scratch behind the ears, and secured the c
“Jocko, we’re glad you live here. We like you, yes, but try to resist th

I looked to him for grateful acknowledgment, but he just wagged his tail ha

Chapter Four

The Problem

I reflected on the whelping box stuffed with plump pups and mommy-
love. The processes worked well. The environment favored life. It was secu

Universal. I'm using this word for things that are always and every-
where true—
primordial, prototypical, and primal archetypes stemming from the origins.

Harmony and equilibrium. Sopranos, altos, tenors, and basses sing quite dif

I saw all this philosophical stuff in a simple whelping box. It got
me to thinking about what happened next.

Yelping as Alienation

What happened next? Original harmony and equilibrium succumbed to negative, destabilizing conditions. Big Greedy, indifferent to sib
suffering, shouldered out Wee Hungry. Other pups fought one another for n

Jocko rebelled from the family walk; he broke our covenant not to run off i

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illicit garbage-diving. He showed strong self-gratification and weak self- discipline, no give-and-take mutuality, and no empathy for his benefactors' peaceful enjoyment of our common space. Jocko became an uncouth r
serving indifference dropped discord into the harmony and upset the equili
rium.

Moreover, nature itself seemed indifferent. Jocko, Jessie, and the other pup
toothed sucklings, faded away and couldn't care less.

The Whelp-Yelp Dichotomy

So there we have it—the whelp-
yelp dichotomy in which Jocko and family illustrate (1) the positive whelp
—origins enjoy harmonized equilibrium, and (2) the negative yelp
—alienation disrupts harmo- nized equilibrium.

Alienation. I use this word as a substitute for the word sin. Sin, sins, sinful,
—
even down to mere wrongdoing. The word has lost its power to convey the
mate reality. It has become exhausted and depreciated. Therefore, in order

I'll sharpen the meanings implicit in these terms as we progress, but, for no

A Way Station to Consider the Word God

In the first chapter I began considering the various meanings attached to th

I think a lot of our confusion stems from having two ideas in mind, each ca
different from the other. One concept of God—
the one we get from reasoning backward to a first cause—
bears little resemblance to the concept we get from
the Bible; moreover, vari- ous other concepts are free-

floating through our culture. And yet we call them all by the same name. It
—car—
to name them all. Without differentiation, we can find no agreed meaning.

So I am trying to maintain strict differentiations. This requires me to
sider them as a single concept—God.

Some Questions for Starters

The troubling phenomenon—when equilibrium so soon degener-
ated into alienation—
appears everywhere in human suffering and wrongdoing. From
my study of history, from the daily newspaper, from working with people i
own life, I see gross universal alienation upsetting equilibrium, leading to a
ity of imbalance, discord, and destruction.

That certainly accords with my own everyday experience. Over and over
I have enjoyed, perhaps you have too, original equilibrium in rela-
tionships, ideas, and jobs. Negative forces have then alienated
the equi- librium.

Thinking such thoughts can lead to a melancholy conclusion that life means

Personally, I have no use for nihilism. But if the answer is not noth-
ing, what is it? What causes this degeneration? How did all this origi-
nate, this equilibrium devolving into alienation? How did the universe itse
Where does any-
thing come from? What's the purpose of it all? Where is it all going?

For such quandaries, perhaps Jocko could help me retrieve some answers.

What am I saying? This dog was, after all, nothing but a big Labrador retrie
—a yellow-white, powerful, drooly, handsomely proportioned

dog. He had a massive chest, capacious jaws, far more skin than he needed
Pong paddles, a tail that could have hit home runs, eyes that could say any
cious, perpetual, omnivorous

appetite. He could inhale a bowl of Kibbles in less than a minute. He tried t

He was a presence.

Jocko's Retrieval Policies

We did most of our retrieving games in our backyard. I'd call, "Jocko-
o, find a ball!" and Jocko would sprint around with his tail swinging

searching the grass. He'd find a tennis ball and clamp it between thos

too. With nose down he'd keep searching in the weeds, under the bushes, th

Whatever he was driven by, genes, DNA, hor- mones—
I don't know. But he had steadfast determi-
nation to get all the stuff I pitched out there—
tennis balls, sticks, logs, a broken basketball, and a tree-
snagged Frisbee—back where they came from.

Actually he was indiscriminate about what he brought in. I had not thrown

Every retrieval challenge would be fine for this intrepid dog. Fearless he wa

Jocko the Spiritual Advisor

Analogies between Jocko and my quandaries illuminated pesky enig-
mas about life, death, the Bible, the church, spirituality, and so
forth.

I found that watching Jocko could open windows onto the struggles I had i
streets, drooling while Judy and I ate, wolfing down his
food, prowling about looking for scraps, and bounding out to greet us when

Walking with Jocko

One early morning, I got my jacket. The familiar sound alerted the sleeping
and pressing his nose against the crack. Out we went. He leapt
into the front seat of the old Toyota then remembered the rule and tried to
side up and you sit on the floor and jam your wet nose against the window.

As we drove to our walking place, we passed familiar landmarks. Jocko hov

These woods covered a hillside with five ravines separating four short ridge

ravines. Mature hardwoods covered the area. Trails crossed and criss-
crossed, some leading out onto the ridges, dropping down to the bot-
tomland, and intersecting with others coming down the ravines. They mad
and nowhere.

Jocko and I got up to a high point where I could look over the trees growin

I got a grip on his harness and shouted, “Go, Jocko, go for it!” and that mus

I think of these trails as the topographical equivalent of the quan-
daries I have elected to explore. Different thought-
paths lead up to clar-
ity and down to obscurity. They intersect one another so that thoughts con
A trudge up this ridge of a quandary might bring a great view of a new con

Tying Some of This Together

So far we’ve looked at the first of the four major quandaries in this book.
I have titled it, “Evidently, Not All Is Well: What Seems to Be the Pro

notion that “nonetheless, God retrieves us” which will lead to a retrieval sp

This raises ultimate questions about why we face such a predica-
ment, where we came from and where we're going, and who's in cha
bly wrong and we seem to have no control over it nor any comprehe
sion of why.

A Sneak Preview

In the rest of this book I'll wander around with Jocko on various trails of th

One trail will take me to where I have to choose between "no deity at all" o

conclusion, a logical dead end, I'll follow the other one, which leads to idea
a first-
cause deity of origination, a solidly rational but insufficient concept.

On another trail I'll trudge up the Bible's steep slopes to an eleva-

tion from which I
can see not only the sunrise but also the Bible as a whole, which shows fort
lical deity.

My final trail will lead to a coalescence of the first-
cause deity and the biblical deity, from which we can explore our retrieval

Second Quandary

FINDING THE GOD OF CAUSATION

Big Questions Need Big Answers.

Wondering about Origins, cosmic Realities, Meanings of
Life Leads to Wondering about Deity.

Could We Find a Deity of Causation?

Chapter Five

Causation and the First Cause

Jocko emerged from Jessie's womb:

- Because his fetus had gestated for some weeks there
- Because Jessie's ovum had been ready to receive insemination f
- Because Jessie was a fertile dog
- Because she had come from a line of fertile dogs that had evolved fro
- That had evolved from a mammal that had evolved from an earlier life-form
- That had evolved from the first life-form that had found a life- sustaining environment
- That had evolved from physical interactions
- That had developed from various causes linked in an unbroken chain
- Right on back to an initial cause of the entire universe: the first cause

Jocko emerged from Jessie's womb not only as the effect of all those physic

- Because Tucker had decided that she wanted a litter of AKC pups

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- Because she needed money for graduate school
- Because she wanted to become a teacher
- Because she liked working with children
- Because of innumerable other conceptual (as opposed to physical) causes.

One branch of these conceptual causes extends back to a choice that Judy five years ago to marry and have a family, which led to Tucker. Traci ilar choices back in the twentieth century. That's a lot of concepts, e —categorical logic in play here—
originated also in the first cause, which caused all those concepts. Jo friendly personality, irresistible urges to feed and retrieve, somet

that made him wag his tail, and all sorts of other traits, attractive and le

Imagine the particularity of Jocko, that particular dog emerg-
ing at that time in that place. It depended upon these three series of causes

the head swim. But simple reasoning demands that we acknowledge the ca

multiplying effects in
exponential volumes till you and I find ourselves facing whatever we are fa

This backward reasoning to find that Jocko is the effect of causes is called t

The Celestial Pinball Machine

Causative reasoning works backward or forward. Consider a front-
ward example. Visualize a pinball machine with a spring-
loaded plunger that you pull back so a ball can load into its barrel. When y
pin that bounces it over to another pin. The exact angle of impact may put
it high on the pin or sideways on the pin or glancing along the bot-
tom of the pin.

The angle of impact determines which direction the ball goes next and, thu
other pins it could hit, bounc-
ing hither and yon and always working a little farther down the inclined ta
to be loaded again into the barrel.

The causes and effects here operate like cosmic causes and effects. They ap
con-
ditions are present at the moment of the ball's impact on a given pin. Thes
predictable effects, such as a

precise vector and a precise velocity of the ball as it bounces away. These v

Far from being random, all these causes and effects are fixed by laws of phy

the current state of the finish on the table and the surrounding atmospheric

This hard, inflexible reasoning has the appeal of certainty and clarity, but t
restless and don't want to leave the principle of causation unsu-
pervised. It raises more questions,

ornery questions, than it settles, like, "Where did the first cause come from-
deity, or nothing?"

Reflection, Discussion, and Further Quandaries

Consider the causation in this event: one clear winter morning I decided to
the eaves. I didn't notice that I
had put the feet of the ladder on leaves frozen to the asphalt, or that the su
slip-
pery leaves. This motion pulled the top of the ladder off the eaves.

Gravity dropped the ladder and left me unsupported. As my feet swung inw

until I hit the driveway, flat on my back. The impact dislocated my shoulde

There were more details to the causation, of course, but that's enough to

Now, why did this whole thing happen? Three types of answers: conceptual, physical, and metaphysical.

First, the conceptual causes. It happened because I decided to do this chore sufficient, declined. It happened because I didn't notice that the leaves were a slippery place to put th a ladder. Why didn't I notice? I didn't notice because I am chronically absen

Second, the physical causes. Why did the ladder abandon me? Because its fe feet slip? Because icy leaves are slippery. Why did I land flat on my ba ation and velocity of my fall. All of these combined to affect the rota

If any one of those conditions had been different from its actual specificatio able or kill me because of the precise combination of conditions that

did actually exist, a combination that laws of physics governed absolutely t

Third: the metaphysical causes. Why, in the grand scheme of things, did I n

Stop right there. That question begs a prior question: Is there a “grand sche

Many people think there is, saying, for example, “Your time wasn’t u

Other people think that a metaphysical agency such as God or deity or karn

These opinions have certain implications. “Your time wasn’t up,” mea
self, God had neglected to take care of you or had deliberately stood

Moreover, these answers imply that a supernatural agency such as fate or God can change the workings of the laws of physics (or chemistry, or biology) to change the outcomes.

In pondering these mystical matters, I also reflect on this fact: On May 2
meaning friends told my parents, “God wanted him home.” Do we be

These are the sorts of quandaries that emerge as soon as we ask, “What wer

In reflecting upon why things happen, whether “good” things or “bad” thin

Once you have settled these,
consider this further quandary. When I mentioned “inflexible laws of physic
brows because you know something about physics and I don’t. You may kn
atomic actions and reac- tions.

I have learned everything I know about these from a book titled *The Mind o*
tic things. They just don’t play by the rules.

So I think that while scientists advance our knowledge of the certain-
ties and uncertainties of how things happen in the natural world, we must

Chapter Six

The Big Bang

Ever since people first reasoned backward to derive a logical first cause, t
enteenth—and eighteenth-
century British thinkers, and the American founders.6 The generic te
with another approach, which is to accept the biblical account of cre-
ation as described in the book of Genesis. (Gen. 1–
2) These two approaches have been in steady tension.

In the twentieth century, yet a third approach appeared—
the big bang theory. According to a consensus among most scientists, our u
verse came into being as a moment of immense expansion,
a big bang that has been expanding and forming our inflationary universe f

The Concept of “Nothing”

To understand the big bang theory you must first get the concept of nothing
—
Earth, moon, stars, all scientific law, all space and time, and all concepts. U
—nothingness.

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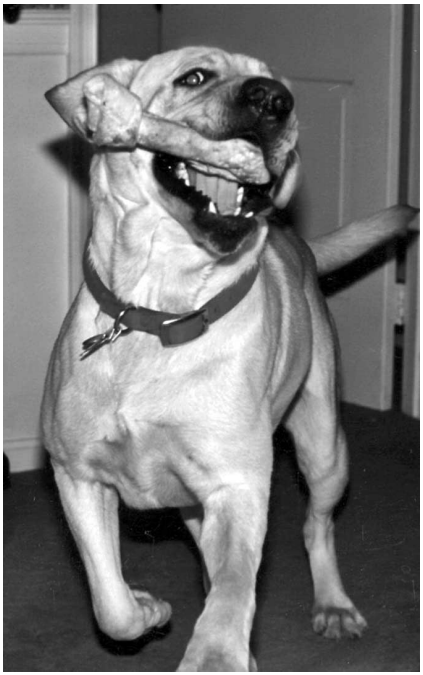
The Big Bang/First Cause

So the big bang happened at no time. There was no “before the big bang” b



matter because there was no matter. The big bang just happened.9

From this nothingness, ex nihilo, pro-
ceeded effects, each effect becoming a cause of further effects which event
tual alike, including the laws governing them.

Reflection, Discussion, and Further Quandaries

I am interested right now in the big bang not as a scientific event but as a c

how things happen. In the big bang, reality emerged from nothing. Just so,

Consider: An idea begins to take form in your mind. Perhaps it begins soon
thing happen. Perhaps the idea comes fully formed, or perhaps it starts as j

It may be something small, like an idea to go to the beach with friends. Or

Over time, it develops from idea into yearning, then into plan, then into act

I invite you to search your memory for such an experience. Are you s

Chapter Seven

What Caused the

Big-Bang/ First-Cause?

One afternoon Judy went shopping, leaving Jocko alone. He watched her le
handed. Later he watched her reappear, carrying (1) a turkey, (2) a portion

watch us unpack. He seemed to sense being in the presence of deity. Who w
fisher-gatherer. She must be the first cause of all that's good.

Later, I got out his ear drops, a concoction to remedy the itchy growth
to his feet, shook his head, and sprayed the stuff all over the kitchen,
bad.

Jocko was learning, I fancy, a concept of a binary deity—
two entities in charge of sometimes different matters and sometimes
the same mat-
ters. From his perspective, he knew only that Judy fed him and that I hose

plines from both Judy and me. He got led on walks with either or both of u

We gave pleasure and inflicted pain. We controlled consequences. We impo
must have imagined that we were, therefore, deity—
the origin of all his reality, the controller of all consequences, chief nurture
tor, enforcer, provider; the omniscient, the omnipotent.

Do you suppose Jocko pondered such matters in those long snoozes betwee
pened to him back to an origination, concluding that we were his big bang
first cause?

Deriving a Deity

In my early twenties I gave up the woefully inadequate concept of God
ventional cultural theology. It seemed thin and childish. I also gave u

But after Judy and I married and had children, I yearned for a sub-
stantial, adult concept of God. I sought a deity behind all that is
and all that goes on. I got back to the first cause. I decided that the first cau
bang. Then I wondered where the big bang came from.

The Cause of the Big Bang/First Cause

This question of the cause of the big bang/
first cause brought me to a three-
branched fork in the road of thought. I stood at it and gazed down each bra

1. Nothing caused the big bang/
   first cause. It was its own cause, causing everything else. In tracing ca
   first cause was indeed the terminal, the absolute end, beyond which e

1. The first cause was God and there was no big bang. First God, then cr
   that God created the universe where-is, as-is, in seven days.

1. God caused the big bang/first cause.

When I trace any effect to its causes to their causes and continue right on b
first cause, I hit the wall that separates perceptible reality from conceptual
tists observe and organize into science. On the other side of the
bound-
ary lies religion in a domain with neither time nor space nor any other ver
that domain a conceptual reality. I can imagine it and work with thoughts a

Since it is not verifiable, one might say that it exists only as a category in

It's like Jocko. As far as he's concerned, we transcend his dogness. We prov

Similarly, I can imagine the eternity and infinity of transcendence, but I ca

Deity

This leads me to say that the ultimate reality of transcendence constitutes, for me, deity. And to say further that this deity is the originator.

Originator. I deliberately do not use the words create, creation, or creator b ally correct. They believe that a few thousand years ago, God "created" hea

terms, and I will return to the word create as soon as I have explained what

Transcendent Deity

Transcendent deity has one cardinal attribute, namely, the capability to ori
every- thing ex nihilo, provides the “thing” missing in “no-
thing,” brings every-
thing into being, originates all conceptual reality and all physical rea

Transcendence versus Immanence

This deity is
transcendent, with no personality and no personal pres-
ence. Found only in the far reaches of our conceptual categories, tran-
scendent deity stays out of touch. We conceptualize this deity way up yond
nent deity would be present among us and personal.

I have had to learn not to assign human characteristics to this con-
cept of impersonal transcendence. It’s
hard not to say, for example, that the “transcendent deity decided to origin

Reflection, Discussion, and Further Quandaries

The line of reasoning in this chapter explains that transcendent deity origin

that reasoning. What thoughts do you have about the relative merits of eac

So far, all I have talked about in this book is a concept of God derived by re
maker God," which visualizes deity making the intricate workings of the u
the intricate workings of a watch, winding it up, and leav-
ing it to do its own mechanical thing. Deism served me well for a while as

Chapter Eight

What Did the God of Causation Originate?

To this point in the book, my reasoning has proceeded like this: we experie
first cause, which got us where we are.

Now I will pursue the question of what God originated in that big bang/

first cause. Since I want this book to be short and readable, I must either an
nated through the big bang/first cause.

First, I think, God provided the big bang/
first cause with what the scientists call “initial conditions.”11 The first of th

would have been a cluster of concepts, including:

- Ecology: Interdependence among all realities
- Equilibrium: The result of countervailing forces exactly balanc-
  ing out one another.
- Homeostasis: The tendency to return to a stable state.
- Equanimity: Balance and evenness in spirit

- Equality: The proportional value of each element to the whole.
- Compensation: The tendency of a given condition to have a cor-
  responding and balancing condition.
- Symmetry: Balance and correspondence in allocation of fea-
  tures
- Proportion: Appropriate sizes, shapes, quantities, and other chara
- Harmony: All things working together to achieve balance.
- Accord: Underlying
  reconciliation of opposing elements Call it all, taken together, shalom

Shalom

Ancient Hebrew thinkers came up with
the concept called shalom. We translate it “peace” but not in the sense o
cal greeting, it wishes reconciliation. As a goal, it wishes tranquillity in the

I think that shalom consolidates all the initial conditions of the big bang/
first cause listed above, conditions which continue to permeate our univers

God Originated Physical Causes and Effects

In the physical domain, we can easily say that the first cause caused all the

and on. If you start making your own list, eventually everything scien-
tifically observable and mathematically demonstrable will go on it.

God Originated Concepts

The causes of concepts are not so easy to identify as causes of physi-
cal events. It’s easy to determine the cause of Jocko’s bulging tummy (the
ray shows a plastic bag full of Kibbles stuck in his digestive tract (the

In my view, the first cause caused not only all physical effects but also all c

God Originated Laws Governing Everything

The first cause also originated all the scientific and mathematical laws gove
sation, namely, physics, chemistry, biology, psychology, and mathemat-
ics. The first cause caused everything that operates by discernible, more-
or-less predictable processes.

God Originated Equilibrium and Alienation

Again, if we experience anything, it is a reality. All reality came to us from
ities, for it means that God originated the ill effects of alienation.

But wait. It is one thing for me to put a bucket of paint on the top
of a stepladder, and it is quite another for Jocko to come racing around the

God Originated Potential

A potential contains the possibility of becoming real. Without poten-

tial a certain thing cannot become real. Potential is like Jocko's year
too tightly for even 105 pounds of dog muscle to turn this potential
but it won't necessarily.

Now, suppose the feeder-
lady or her spouse doesn't jam the top all the way down into the rim of the
lady and spouse become angry, and Jocko becomes scarce.

Since the potential
for gorging was a reality, like all other realities, it had to come from somew

originated untold causes ago in the general potential that God origi-
nated.

That means that God originated not the petty larceny in the matter of the d
—an act of alienation—
but only the potential that Jocko would commit the larceny. This puts God

Anything that we experience has come about because the potential for that
ence existed before the experience itself. It existed in potential only. This h
nificance. It means that God originated our universe open to the possibility
thing could happen, anything, that is, for which God did
originate a
potential. It doesn't appear, for example, that there's any potential for gra
potential for love to

include not only joy,
fidelity, healing and other positives but also, para-
doxically, pain and misery.

It also means that God does not cause any of
the negatives, the alien-
ation, the calamities that we suffer, only the potential for them. Complex c
—physical, emotional, psychological, and con- ceptual—
make these actual.

So, to summarize, I think that God loaded the concept of potential into the
bang/first cause.

A Note on Phraseology

Notice this expression, “God loaded [x] into the big bang/
first cause.” It projects an image of God selecting certain contents or attribu

the big bang will cause when it begins its expansion. It’s a crude imag
scendent deity, it has suggestions of loading a cannon, and it implies
—the ones I am enumerating here—
and not certain other characteristics. They had to come from so
God “loaded them into the big bang/first cause.”

God Originated the Potential for Evolution

Once we accept that God originated causation and potential, we
take a short step to evolution. As I see it, the big bang is expanding accordi

That’s evolutionary. If the conditions needed for a certain
potential never happen, the potential never actualizes and dies out and doe
think God originated the potential for evolution.

God Originated the Potential for Life

The big bang/
first cause evidently contained the potential for a chain of causes that led to
ditions became reality. They actually did become real, and life actually did
forms survived and repro-

duced. Some died without reproducing. Some reproductions survived to rep

Thus does each generation cause another,
which causes another. But each also has new, slightly different attributes, e
nated contains newness, freshness, and originality. Life ever emulates univ
—
that God made life potential in this inflationary universe and that eventuall
design presupposes a known end result. In our open universe, I
prefer

to assign unlimited effectuality to God's potentials.

God Originated the Potential for Humankind

Once upon a time a certain hominid—by which I mean an evolu-
tionary prehuman—
went to sleep one night having never had any spir-
itual sense or thought whatever and having never had any capability to thi
—
fear, hunger, fatigue, and anger. This hominid had never conceptualized an

tual thought like, perhaps, “beautiful” or “amazing.” I think that this homi

and became a human being.

Let’s suppose that no other hominid had ever had a conceptual thought. Ou

other terms, by developing consciousness of a reality beyond the physi-
cal—a spiritual reality, transcendence. Thus did we first connect—
no matter how slightly—
with transcendence, our originator God, and our God of causation. That co

Evolution had been going on for some time before this
happened. In that time, I guess, the ancestors of this hominid evolved some
oped these inbred capabilities until they became ready to think a con-
ceptual thought. And the thought came, just like that.

Perhaps then several offspring of this former hominid inherited this genetic
ity somehow gave some of them an edge for survival. Perhaps those who c

In any event, our capability to think concepts had to start some-
where. This is my idea of how it could have happened. I think that hominid
—by definition, nonhuman humanoids—lived without spiri-
tuality until somehow it emerged into consciousness as subtly as the lighte

Because God had originated the potential for concepts, loading them into th

God Originated Choice

I have made certain choices in my life, and other people have made certain
In my lifetime,
I have chosen to do and not to do certain things. I could have chosen other

make commitments to certain things and not to others, to acquire and deve
Cat (who never offered much to think about), to learn about sailing but not
cer, to become practiced in teaching and learning but not in college admin

I think that our capacity to make choices—
and the cousins of choice, such as decisions, judgments, tastes, habits, and
—evi-
dently originated from God and the first cause that initiated our poten-
tial for choice and choosing.

The Meaning of Create

Strictly defined, the word create is used for originating something out of no
of transcen- dence, created out of
nothing all that we now experience in a way that is dynamic, growing, evol

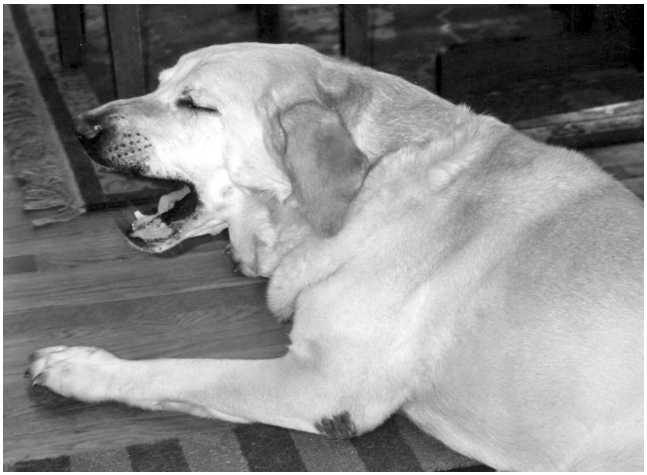
Stipulating, then, that for me the word create and its derivatives denote wh
first cause, I will return to using it and will no longer use the term originate

God of Causation, Transcendent Creator, Beyond “Beyond”

These are but a few thoughts about our creator, God. Thinking about God is
sonally, I need to be able to think about God so as to get to know God. The

- Beyond comprehension, beyond definition, beyond time, space, and r
- Not-a-thing, not-a-person, not even imaginable

- Other, then beyond other to Other, breaking whatever limits my concept of
- Not-being, the ground of all being, transcending existence
- Ultimate reality
- The beginning and the end—Alpha and Omega
- Creating the big bang/first cause
- Creating the potential for existence and being
- Creating the potential for all time, space, matter, energy, and thought



- Creating the potential for all science, equilibrium, dynamics, harmony, disequilibrium, disharmony, peace, and conflict
- Creating the potential for all biology, chem- istry, and physics
- Creating the potential for liberty, process, growth, and cause and effect unlimited
    - Creating all laws of science tightly bounding all dynamics but liberati
- Paradox
- Mystery
- Creator God

Reflection, Discussion, and Further Quandaries

How big is God? I like a little book by J. B. Phillips entitled *Your God Is To*
have outlined above, urging the reader to open up the concept of God to tra
tions to our concept of God. What do you think?

What about intelligent design, also known as ID? My discussion in this secti

For many decades, evolution has been the accepted explanation for how life forms survive by adapting to changing environments. It has been the accept

Some people find, however, that evolution has serious flaws because it cannot explain every development in life-forms, especially those which they consider to be “irreducibly complex.” An cated to promoting this idea is the Discovery Institute.13 They conclude th forms, that such developments must be part of an original universal design

Other people think that evolution has been fully competent to evolve comp forms and that our study of evolution has simply not yet discovered the dyn evolutionary structures. Their solution, therefore, is to continue scientific in

Some people promoting this view think that God created evolution in the fi

The explanation I have outlined in this section might lead a reader to think coming all challenges of complexity. Do I think that we live in a designed u state. I think we live in a contingent, organic universe that continues to evo

As to the educational implications of the intelligent-design move-ment, I fear for the future of science if the proponents of ID succeed in substituting a designer to explain evolutionary complexity, thus fore-stalling the investigations needed to discover complete scientific processes.

introducing a metaphysical factor into a scientific discipline crosses the line

Our colonists came to this land with convictions that European theocracies sup-
ported lives and our private lives. Efforts to impose ID thinking into public

That's what I think. What do you think?

Third Quandary

FINDING THE BIBLICAL GOD

The Bible: The Most Influential and the
Most Misunderstood Book.

What Does It Say? What Does It Mean?

Who, What, When, and Where Is the God of the Bible?

Chapter Nine

Reading the Bible, Whole

One day Jocko was lying at my feet while I struggled with the account
ing Jesus for blasphemy. His friend Peter is outside denying, three ti

Jocko seemed unmoved by Peter's infidelity. I
continued reading from a later passage (John 21:15-17) in which Jes

three times, once for each denial, "Do you love me?" Three times Peter affi

At this, Jocko's ears became alert, his face and body expec-
tant. He looked like he was say-
ing, "I like the part about 'feed my Labs.'"

"Jocko," I said, "it's feed my lambs, not Labs." And that big, burly dog gave
a-a-a-a."

Misunderstanding the Bible

The reason Jocko misunderstood the Bible was the same reason that I misu
—until 1977 I had never read it. I had read in

it and had heard snippets read in church, but I had never read the wh
workers because you've talked with them in meetings. Miscellaneous

Here are a few examples. In my youth I absorbed children's books tha
—he was lying fast asleep from weariness
— and he died." (Judges 4:21, NRSV) What meaning was I supposed

I had seen artists' renditions of a wimpy Jesus, which was not exactly an ob
Sea. I had heard churchy people use the Bible to certify
a point, like, "The Bible says you should love thy neighbor," or "turn the ot
less-
enough folk axioms. I knew that the Bible told about how Jesus was born, h

Those were nice stories, but none of them impressed me as particu-
larly useful or inspiring. None of them added up to any
coherent mean-
ing. But how should I know? I had never read much of the actual book.

Reading the Bible Whole

By my early forties I had worked out my concept of the God of cau-
sation, a one-dimensional, distant deity of deism. But
this emaciated concept frustrated me. Figuring that there must be somethin

Old and New Testaments and read the whole Bible. That experience led me
—and the spirituality that it fostered—

that I continued seminary work until I was ordained in 1983. From then un

Every week in this wonderful, vital parish I tried to wrestle meanings from
sages, deceptive passages, opaque passages—
merciless taskmasters. They demanded long, hard study and thought. Each
of-context passage cold and immediately get anything out of it.

So I wanted to make these snippets come alive for my parishioners, b
strengthening meanings eluded me. Simplistic interpretations seduce
nations. I found myself dispensing this bromide: "You can't really un

This was a very big problem. These people wanted answers. I went to
ist, high and crazy, broad and hazy, low and lazy. I was no denomin
tional snob; I couldn't afford to be. Beggars can't be choosers. And I

Over the years I worked out a way to read the Bible whole, which let me pu

ing the entire text as a structural unit, looking at it from a bird's-
eye view, and seeking a central meaning that would take precedence over t

The next several chapters outline how this works and how a central meanin
ing God. With this in mind, we'll be ready to work out our retrieval spiritu

Reflection, Discussion, and Further Quandaries

What sort of experiences have you had with the Bible? Inspiring?

Uplifting? Adversarial? Confusing? Instructional?

Chapter Ten

What the Bible Says

Imagine a range of mountains running south to north. Climb up the southern
see the mountain range as a whole, so hike east to where you can see all the

In my seminary years, I read the entire Bible from Genesis to Revelation; th

had seen—
a unified story with a distinct plot. It
started with the beginning of the world, and it ended with the end of the w

Looking more closely, I discerned fourteen episodes making up the biblical

episodes formed the peaks of the narrative and the high points that defined

found that a meaning of the Bible as a whole could emerge from examining these fourteen episodes.

A Literal Synopsis

In my synopsis of these fourteen episodes, I will state each as a plain answe
a literal summary, for I know from years of studying
and teaching literary expression that you begin—not end—
the quest for meaning by determining what the text says, literally, no more,
statement that, for example, "God called Abraham," does
not mean that this actually happened in history as literally written. It mean

Once I have settled what the biblical text says, I can move to the ques
tion: what does it mean? You can't get its meaning until you know w

The Biblical Fourteen

The Bible expresses the following fourteen episodes throughout the thirty-
nine books in the edition I use, the New Revised Standard Version. I use the

1. Creation in equilibrium—
   The Bible started with two (different) accounts of how God created ev

- Alienation—
  The original people, whom the Bible named Adam, Eve, Abel, Cain, and sco
  selves from God and from one another.

1. Call—
   God called Abraham to engender and lead the Israelites to follow Goc
2. Bondage—The Israelites suffered bondage in Egypt.
3. Exodus—God delivered them out of Egypt.
4. Covenant—God made a covenant with them.
5. Wilderness—
   God led them through the wilderness toward the promised land.

- Idolatry—They settled in Canaan, committed persistent idola-
  try (worshiped the local utilitarian Baals), and suffered dire consequences,
  the Diaspora and exile.
- Grace—Over and over God invited them back from alienation.

- Incarnation—
  God became incarnate in Jesus of Nazareth, who taught and enacted God
  policies.

1. Crucifixion—The author- ities convicted
   Jesus. Jesus gave himself in sacrificial death.

- Resurrection—God res-
  urrected Jesus as the risen Christ, a new creation.
- Body of Christ—His transformed disciples rec-
  ognized Jesus as the risen Christ and themselves as the Body
  of Christ.

1. Communion—God has a New Jerusalem for the end times.

Ezra's History of the Israelites

In the 500s BC a high priest of Israel named Ezra spoke to the Israelites to r

from the beginnings. His words, as recorded in the Old Testament Book of N
ings from my list of the fourteen biblical episodes. (The final five episodes,

Creation

And Ezra said: "You are the Lord, you alone; you have made heaven, the h

Alienation

(Ezra says nothing of the Adam and Eve story. However, he does weave the

Call

You are the Lord, the God who chose Abram and brought him out of Ur of t
Abraham; and you found his heart
faithful before you, and made with him a

covenant to give to his descendants the land of the Canaanite, the Hittite, t
8, NRSV)

Bondage

And you saw the distress of our ancestors in Egypt and heard their cry at th

Exodus

You performed signs and wonders against Pharaoh and all his ser-
vants and all the people of his land, for you knew that they acted insolentl
lar of fire, to give them light on the way in which they should go. (Neh. 9:
12, NRSV)

Covenant

You came down also upon Mount Sinai, and spoke with them from heaven,
bath to them and gave them commandments and statutes and a law throug
14, NRSV)

Wilderness

For their hunger you gave them bread from heaven, and for their thirst you

Idolatry

But they and our ancestors acted presumptuously and stiffened their necks
17a, NRSV)

Grace

But you are a God ready to forgive, gracious and merciful, slow to anger an
plied their descendants like the stars of heaven, and brought them into the
ancestors to enter and possess. So the descendants went in and possessed th
dued before them the inhabitants of the land, the Canaanites, and gave the

cities and a rich land, and took possession of houses filled
with all sorts of goods, hewn cisterns, vineyards, olive orchards, and fruit tr
25, NRSV)

Then Ezra recites a cycle of the Israelites' persistent idolatry, which eli

Idolatry

Nevertheless they were disobedient and rebelled against you and cast your
ted great blasphemies. (Neh. 9:26, NRSV)

Grace

Therefore you gave them into the hands of their enemies, who made them s

Idolatry

But after they had rest, they again did evil before you, and you abandoned

Grace

yet when they turned and cried to you, you heard from heaven, and many t
29a, NRSV)

Idolatry

Yet they acted presumptuously and did not obey your command-
ments, but sinned
against your ordinances, by the observance of which a person shall live. Th

Grace

Many years you were patient with them, and warned them by your spirit th
31, NRSV)

Nevertheless

Note how often Ezra asserts the unexpected, paradoxical grace of God's resp
—stay-
ing with the Israelites and not forsaking them although they so plainly des

idolatry. Indeed, he uses the explicit "nevertheless" to highlight God's rever
expectation, what I'm calling the nonetheless response.

Remaining Episodes from the New Testament

We have seen Ezra's expression of the first nine of the fourteen bibli-
cal episodes. I move now to the remaining five, which are found in th

Incarnation, Crucifixion, Resurrection

In the New Testament we first encounter four Gospels that narrate
Jesus's incarnation (Episode Ten), crucifixion (Episode Eleven), and r
monized biography.

I prefer a different solution: to recognize that each Gospel grew up in its ow

expression of what Jesus's life, death, and resurrection meant to that comm

The differences among the four Gospels, when seen in this light, seem not p
right. John lets us see Jesus as the sacrificial Lamb
of God; the others let us see Jesus as the incarnation of God's great d

This approach lets us appreciate, from four different angles, how Jesus enac

Stories about Jesus circulated by word of mouth throughout Galilee and Je
tion. They cherished these stories and formed them into theological

Distinctive Features of Each Gospel Community

- Matthew—
  This community had Jews who had converted from Judaism and
  were still living near friends and families
  who had not converted, so they needed to hear how Jesus had actual
  God.

- Mark—
  This community faced persecution, so the Gospel of Mark offered insp

Jesus faced persecution.

- Luke—
  This community had gentiles who lived in the midst of much illness, broke
  sion.
- John—
  This community had former Jews who struggled to decide whether Jesus w
  (3) partly human and partly divine, or (4) fully
  human and fully divine.

Distinctive Features of Jesus's Beginnings

The images here extend from Jesus the plain human from Nazareth all the

- Matthew—
  The Gospel opens with a long genealogy, certifying that Jesus de

- Mark—
  The Gospel opens on Jesus's baptism. No nativity is recorded. Signific
- Luke—The Gospel has the familiar, vivid nativity scene, high-
  lighting Jesus's simultaneous human-
  divine status. A genealogy says that Jesus descends from Adam. Signi
  sents God's son, traced from Genesis, to signify his role as the world

- John—
  The Gospel opens with language reminiscent of the opening of Genes
  fully human and fully divine, the exalted Son of God.

Distinctive Features of Jesus's Identity

The spread here extends from Mark's Jesus facing a suffering death to Matt

- Matthew—
  Jesus represents the new Moses, come to fulfill all the Jewish law and

- Mark—
  Jesus represents the suffering and persecuted, destined to a sacrificial death
- Luke—Jesus
  represents the healing and unifying power of God, offering compassion, hea
  trodden and marginalized worldwide.
- John—Jesus stands revealed as the Son of God, the divine pres-
  ence, opening God's love to all who receive him.

Distinctive Features of Jesus's Dying

In each case, Jesus died as he lived, but each Gospel has a distinctive featur

- Matthew—
  Jesus died as a confident representative of a reformed,
  renewed Judaism.

- Mark—
  Jesus died forsaken, the suffering servant close to all for whom life is a veil

- Luke—Jesus died still concerned for others around him,
  bring- ing assurance that God heals through loving sacrifice.

- John—

Jesus strode triumphant to death, carrying the cross in majesty, fully in cha

Commonalities in the Four Gospels

With these differences in mind, we can now notice the commonalities in the four Gospels' accounts of the Incarnation, Crucifixion, and Resurrection.

- Incarnation—
  All four Gospels say that Jesus accumulated disciples and that he taught and dramatized his policies. These include (1 heal in the name of God, (3) the merits of a life of self-giving and God-centeredness, and (4) willingness to deal personally and compassiona

- Crucifixion—
  All four tell how religious authorities colluded with Roman authorities to c (1) Jesus's last supper with his disciples, (2) his prayer with them in Gethsemane

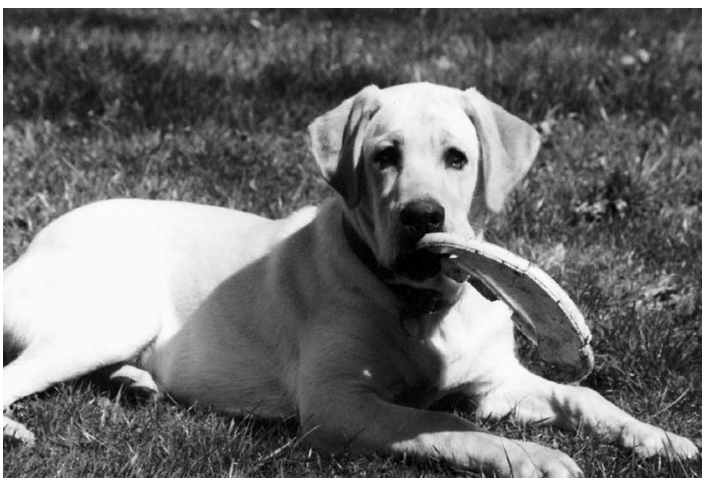
- Resurrection—All four attest that on the following Sunday, disciples discovered that the tomb was empty. All say that the disciples experienced personal contact with Jesus resurrected, although t

they had known in life only in degrees that vary from Gospel to Gospel.

Episode Thirteen: The Body of Christ

Now that we have seen the first nine episodes from the Old Testament and

Through the resurrected Christ, God commissioned disciples
to become the unified Body of Christ, the presence of Christ in the New Cr
—Jews or Greeks, slaves or free—
and we were all made to drink of one Spirit.…
Now you are the body of Christ and individually members of it." (1 Cor. 12



He urged the members of the Body of Christ to adopt a high stan-
dard of relationships: "As God's chosen ones, holy and beloved, clothe you

kindness, humility, meek-
ness, and patience. Bear with one another and, if anyone has a complaint a
give. Above all, clothe your- selves with love, which binds

everything together in perfect harmony. And let the peace of Christ rule

in your hearts, to which indeed you were called in the one body. And be th

I'll have a good deal more to say about the Body of Christ in the last two ch

Episode Fourteen: Communion

The last of the fourteen episodes describes the final communion with God a
munion appears in the Book of the Revelation of John, where we read this

Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth; for the first heaven and th
He will dwell with them as their God; they will be his peo-
ples, and God himself will be with them; he will wipe every tear fro
be no more, for the first things have passed away." And the one who
Also he said, "Write this, for these words are trustworthy and true." T

The first thirteen episodes are relatively straightforward accounts of what t
This fourteenth episode is anything but straightforward because it is a visio

What I have given here is my best brief estimate of what the Bible says abo

ter at the end of this book.

Reflection, Discussion, and Further Quandaries

Remember that I limited the scope of this chapter to only a summation of what the Bible says, with no intent of assigning it any meaning. Does anything in this chapter challenge you or disturb your s

Chapter Eleven

How a Plot Works

Having worked out a concept of God based on reasoning from causation, we are now seeking a concept of God based on what the Bible tells us

My approach to this quest depends upon a study of the biblical plot. What is meant by plot? How does a plot work? How does a pl

19 Can we arrange those fourteen episodes into a plot?

How Does a Plot Work?

The classic plot has five stages, or acts. Here is a simple plot illustrating those five acts.

Act One—Equilibrium. We come home from a pleasant evening with friends and find Jocko snoozing in his bed. We're ha scene of equilibrium and harmony.

Act Two—
Alienation. Jocko begins to agitate. He stands up and lowers his head, gagg all those symptoms
of a dog's stomach getting set to send back something indigestible.

Act Three—
Suspense. Judy throws open the back door. I grab the brute's neck and start

continue dragging the gagging beast. He continues to chuck up these tidy ro

Act Four—
Climax. “Brillo pads? Yes, ma’am, we get quite a few calls about Labs

Act Five—
Resolution. Judy and I have a good laugh while scooping up the slobbe

The Dynamics of This Simple Plot

Here’s the drama in “Jocko and the Ate, um, Eight Brillo Pads.”

1. Everything was just ducky when we got home—
   harmonious equilibrium.

- Jocko’s illicit behavior and its consequences upset the equilib- rium
  —alienation.
- We experienced suspense—
  would Judy and I get him to the door before the eruption? Had Jocko poiso
- We reached the climax of the struggle (Jocko safely outdoors) and the susp

1. We came to resolution as we cleaned up, invited Jocko back in, forga
   him, and celebrated his safety. This action reestablished the initial eq

Thus runs the classic five-
stage plot, ancient and universal. Watch any TV story and see it in action. I

Chapter Twelve

The Plot of the Bible

In order to determine the plot of the Bible, we can assign each of the fourte

Act One—Equilibrium (Episode #1—
Creation): The Bible opens with God creating everything, all balanced in un

Act Two—Alienation (Episode #2—
Alienation): Humankind upsets this balance through self-
serving acts. Adam and Eve alienate them-
selves from God. Cain murders Abel. Thus, from the beginning, humankind

Act Three—Suspense (Episodes #3–9—
Call, Bondage, Exodus, Covenant, Wilderness, Idolatry, Grace): Various epis

Act Four—Climax (Episodes #10–12—
Incarnation, Crucifixion, Resurrection): God, communicating yet another in
becomes incarnate in Jesus. Although the Israelites hear

Jesus explain and enact God's reconciling policies, they commit the ul
mate alienation by killing Jesus. God, however, makes the last and u
mate effort by resurrecting Jesus into a new creation.

Act Five—Resolution (Episodes #13–14—
Body of Christ, Revelation): Jesus's disciples experience the resurrected Chr
humankind in the Last Day.

The Plot Tells What the Bible Says

This, then, states briefly the plot of the Bible. It
shows that the Bible tells one complete story. The narrative
taken as a whole shows one uni-
fied, continuous plot by way of a beginning equilibrium, an alienation, dev

It's like puppy Jocko sitting down and watching his siblings going round an

The Protagonist-Antagonist Issue

In considering the dynamics of a plot, we can figure out how the pro-
tagonist struggles against the antagonist.

"Protagonist?" "Antagonist?" To say "struggle," ancient Greeks used the wo
(t)agon-ist" struggling with an "ant(i)-
agonist." The antagonist would test the char-
acter of the protagonist, the main persona. The antagonist might be
or a personal flaw such as hubris (pride)…or fate…
or the gods, etc. The plot would trace the protago-

nist's struggles, which would develop suspense: Would the protagonist shov

In the biblical plot, who actually is the protagonist? Who or what actually

(Note, please, that I'm using "Israelite" in its broadest sense, the peo-
ple of Israel in their alienated condition. Further, let me stipulate that the

Now, there are two ways to answer this question. First, you may decide t
ter. The Israelites test God's policies. The issue is: will God's policies
nity with one another?

Secondly, you may decide that the Israelites are the protagonist and God is

I believe in the first possibility. If God is the protagonist, then the Bible say

Let me say again that this is, by my reckoning, what the Bible says. We hav

Reflection, Discussion, and Further Quandaries

Two readings of the Bible, some-

times combined into one, are widely accepted: first, the Bible contains prec

and laws that tell us what we should and shouldn't do. And second, the Bib
recting our sins and/
or punishing us for them. Do you have any thoughts on these matters?

Does it appear to you that the reasoning in this book is going to
lead to one or the other of these? Or neither one, or something else?

Chapter Thirteen

The "Nonetheless Response"

Now that we some clarity about what the Bible says and how it says it, I no

The Paradox of Nonetheless

Which of the following statements makes more sense to you? (1) Disgusted

in a disapproving voice; there-
fore, he walked out, lay in his corner with his face to the wall, and w
intractable mis-
behavior, I insulted him and spoke unkind words to him in a disapp

he wagged his tail, smiled a cheerful smile, and curled up beside me, restin

85

I would have expected the first reaction, that of Jocko walking out and shu

But Jocko didn't operate that way—
ever. Maybe he just didn't catch on that I was rejecting him, but maybe he
alienated from
Judy and me. Maybe he was able to do what we all want to do, that is, avo

The word nonetheless signals this sort of attitude and relationship. It carrie
intuitive reversal, you use one of these words.

Nonetheless responses reverse logic and expectation. By contrast, therefore
tude. Irony and paradox lie under nonetheless responses.

Jocko and Nonetheless Responses

Jocko drew nonetheless responses from us. Recall that we found his puppyi
pretty obnoxious. In the chapter
called "Alienation: Jocko's Yelping," I wrote, "Nonetheless, we decided to c
ance." And I noted that Judy and Tucker decided to feed the puppies day a

Where We've Been with Jocko and Where We're Going

I've explained fourteen episodes that form a biblical plot that leads us from

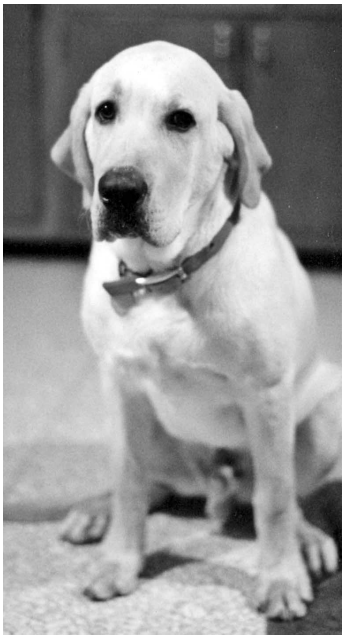
Reflection, Discussion, and Further Quandaries

What experiences have you had with nonetheless responses? How about the

Chapter Fourteen

What Does the Biblical Plot Mean?

One day when I came home, I smelled a certain familiar smell. It said simpl



If I smelled it in the yard as I approached the front door,
it said merely “bad smell,” signifying that Jocko had answered a call of nat

Meaning changes with context. An in-
house smell has meaning different from an outhouse
— no, wait—an out-of-house smell.
That’s why it’s so important to get the whole-
Bible context. Biblical passages take on meanings depending upon
their whole-Bible context. If you get the

wrong context, you get the wrong meaning.

Meaning Emerges from Plot

One context that can yield meaning is plot. Try these: Plot #1—

- Equilibrium: He goes to work at his new job.
- Alienation: He insults the elderly receptionist.
- Suspense: He miscalculates the sale prices. He denies fault for the resulting
- Climax: He gets a pink slip.
- Resolution: He doesn't get another job.

Some valid meanings of this plot include that he has a diplomacy problem, ness. Although the plot did not say any of this explicitly, our common sens

Plot #2—

- Equilibrium: The household feline, Hobie-Cat, finds Jocko sleeping peacefully.
- Alienation: He climbs up on Jocko's inert form like a Lilliputian or
- Suspense: He grips Jocko's coat and clings there while chomping down on the skin of Jocko's furrowed neck. Will Joc the little varmint? Will Hobie take a swing at Jocko's eye and blind him? Jocko wakes up, shows no signs of distres
- Climax: Hobie climbs down and saunters off.

- Resolution: Jocko returns to napping.

Some valid meanings in this plot: Hobie has peculiar tastes in enter-
tainment; Jocko has strong equanimity. Some invalid meanings: Jocko live

his dominance jollies this way. Perhaps, but we haven't enough information

Deriving Meaning from the Bible as a Whole

To tease out the meaning of the biblical plot, I have inserted interpre-

tive words into the plain summary of the fourteen biblical episodes. Now it

After creating a balanced and evolving universe, God gives humankind con
—in Eden, or shalom, or in dramatic terms, equilibrium.

Given the choice to continue in these perfect conditions or not,

our expectation, a nonetheless response, surprises us.

The Israelites suffer bondage in Egypt, but, as before, God continues in stea

mitting wholesale idolatry; nonetheless, God invites them, in grace, over an

In an unexpected climax, God becomes incarnate in Jesus of Nazareth

Now begins the long resolution. Those people who had witnessed thes
ence in the world, the Body of Christ. They spread God's policies wid

A Central Meaning of the Bible

That’s the biblical plot expanded to show its meaning beyond what it me

—

God creates, humankind alienates; nonetheless, God invites us back.

Reflection, Discussion, and Further Quandaries

How does this meaning of the Bible as a whole sit with any meanings you n

Chapter Fifteen

Nonetheless, Agape

Reading the Bible as a whole, we have seen that God had ample justifi-
cation for abandoning or condemning us; nonetheless, according to this rea
being but also—most importantly—
to invite us home. Evidently, God has a nonetheless policy.

God's Nonetheless Policy Shows Grace and Love

We have a word for steadfast concern for the well-
being of others: love. But it gets used so much that it loses force. Consider t

1. "I love your considerate and generous nature" signifies love that is or

- "I love you when you treat me well—but only then"
signifies conditional love that will be withdrawn for cause and reinstated fo
- "I love you regardless of your failures" signifies unconditional love that rem
being of the person loved, sustained at a degree of cost.
This is where the concept of nonetheless comes to bear. To get into this con

The word for getting not what you deserve but love instead is grace. Grace,

response. It says, regardless of my negatives, no matter that I deserve rejection, you nonetheless love me.

The significance of the biblical plot, then, is that the biblical God has polici

Agape

Henceforth, I refer to this biblical grace and love as agape, a Greek wo

into “self-giving love.”

Dictionaries report that it is pronounced all sorts of ways, such as “AH-guh-pe.” (But not “uh-GAPE,” which is what I was—agape—when I first realized the boundless grace and love that God demonstrates in

Reflection, Discussion, and Further Quandaries

In reflecting on your life, locate instances of (1) love being confused with merely liking very much, (2) conditional lo tional love. Locate instances of grace and love combined.

Chapter Sixteen

Interpreting the Bible

One directive we had for Jocko about entering the house was that he could bring in no sticks, balls, or other playthings. He had to leave t

we happened to leave the door ajar and Jocko approached with some sticks

If he did, he got no breaks. While I pitched the slobbery articles back out, I

I did not welcome Jocko coming

home with his mouth jammed with outdoor stuff. I did not treat him as the father treated his prodigal son.

The Parable of the Prodigal Son

The parable of the prodigal son expresses, in miniature, the plot and meani
24, NRSV), setting it into the five-
act structure that we have seen in reading the Bible whole.

Act One: Equilibrium—
Jesus describes a stable household condition.

There was a man who had two sons.

Act Two: Alienation—The son squanders the inheritance.

The younger of them said to his father, “Father, give me the share of the pr
in dissolute living.

Act Three: Suspense—How far will this go?

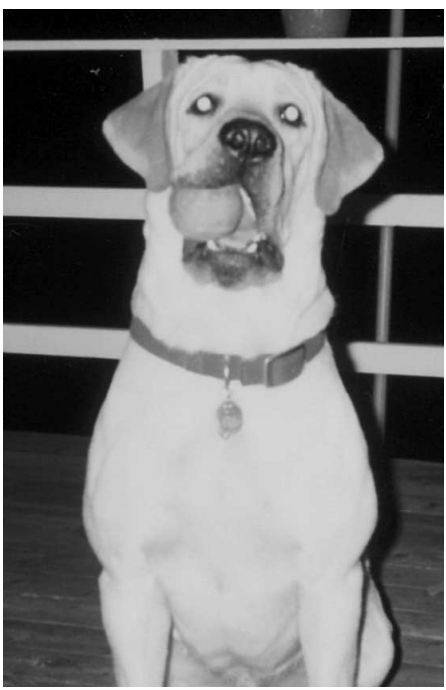
When he had spent everything, a severe famine took place throughout that

no longer worthy to be called your son; treat me like one of your hired han

Act Four: Climax—
Nonetheless, the father responds with gracious love, agape.

But while he was still far off, his father saw him and was filled with compas

Act Five: Resolution—
Both father and son have fitting responses to the climax.



Then the son said to him, “Father, I have sinned against heaven and bef

out a robe—the best one—
and put it on him; put a ring on his finger and sandals on his feet. And get t
brate; for this son of mine was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is f

(The remainder of this parable, concern-
ing the elder son, while an integral part of Jesus's teaching, serves to begin

The Parallel between the Parable and the Bible

To summarize the plot of this parable: the father has made a stable housel
and welcomes him back with a celebration.

That clearly parallels the plot of the Bible: God created all in equilib-
rium, but humankind alienated themselves from God and one another; non

That's interesting. Is it more than interesting? Does it have signifi-
cance for the way I live? Does it make any difference? Or is it merely
tion for living my life.

Love God…Love Self…Love neighbor

So the more I think about it, the more I get drawn to what Jesus did and sa

Yes, God created all in equilibrium and yes, humankind alienated themselv

of but one fitting response to this extraordinary gift of agape: love God…
love self…love neighbor.

There it is. The gold standard. A biblical conclusion that can give direction

Reflection, Discussion, and Further Quandaries

Consider the parable of Jocko, the dog who looked everywhere except whe

One fall afternoon I was raking leaves and Jocko bounded up to me with a

He dropped the stick at my feet and smiled up as if to say,
do your duty, boss. Pitch it out there. But I was on deadline. I kept raking. I

Off he went at a gallop and with about four yards to go slammed on the bra
yards on his side, or chin, rolling entirely over. He fetched up

right at the stick, struggling upright, gripping it in the mighty jaws, a
toon characters. Now here he came, triumphant, ears flapping,

our retrieval spirituality, so boss, chuck this thing out there again.

But yes, I did think removing these leaves trumped this dog's obses-
sions, so I ignored him, but no good. He found a piece of cordwood, the sp
n't let go.
I watched him streak off toward the setting sun. While he raced that way I
covered the log and wrestled it out of the brambles. That gained me ten pe

I couldn't tell whether it disturbed his sense of logic that a west-
heaved log ended up in the eastern brambles. At least it bought me a lit-
tle work time. He was ready to go again, though, and I tried the same ploy

Raking gives me time to think, so I think about what it's like being Jo
—but searching everywhere except where it is.

In searching for meaning in a given passage in the Bible, I have dis-
covered that I can find some of its meaning in the passage itself, but I can't
love self…love neighbor).

Now I invite you to consider what that might mean to you in your ow

Chapter Seventeen

A Concept of the Biblical God

In the first chapters, we found the deity of nature and causation as a concep
construct, a reality derived through reasoning, a tran-
scendent creator God.

From the biblical plot, by contrast, we have seen God interacting w
—a willing- ness to exercise nonetheless agape—
love that has no bounds and no conditions.

But that's not all. Moving now beyond the biblical plot, we can look t

Other Attributes of God

Various places in the Old Testament show us (1) Yahweh, the creator of all; *giving spirit; and (3) a force called in Hebrew hokmah, which provides the c*

Various places in the New Testament show us (1) a transcendent Father; (2) Jesus, the man from Nazareth; (3) Jesus t *verse; (5)* a force which is in Greek *sophia, translated as "wisdom" and*

and (6) a vital spirit called *pneuma, used with a meaning similar to*

ruach.

Yahweh/Father

The characteristics of Yahweh from the Old Testament and Father from the

We see Yahweh/
Father as the creator, the deity who calls people from insignificance, like Al
milk, honey, and dominion over a fertile land.

This Yahweh of the patriarchs, kings, and prophets has a voice to shatter ro
—even becom-
ing incarnate to live among them to show them firsthand how to love beyo
ple like Joseph of Nazareth, Peter the fisherman, and Paul the rabbi, to go
comes even the most prodigal home.

Wisdom/Sophia/Logos

In the so-
called “wisdom literature” in the Old Testament, such as Psalms and Prover
ation, the order and the wisdom of the universe but also providing counsel f
“Come, eat of my bread and

drink of the wine I have mixed. Lay aside immaturity, and live, and walk in
6, NRSV)

This tradition continues in the New Testament, but now the term cha
cept of the *logos, which creates and orders the universe.*

These ideas of the forces behind creation—
hokmah, sophia, and logos—
must bring to mind the God of causation working through the big bang.

Personally, I am struck with how that creator deity of the big bang/
first cause provides an explanation for creation from the rational, scientific,

For me, that narrows the distance between the claims of science and the cla

Ruach/Pneuma

We are accumulating a rich composite of ideas about God. We turn now to
giving, sustaining attribute of God.

Genesis tells us that a wind blew over the first waters of creation. The Hebr
—but

plainly related to breath and air, as in our uses in “pneumonia” and “pneum
ered disciples, imparting to them the new life of God.

I expressed a notion in an earlier chapter that a certain hominid, once upon
pneuma.

God—Yahweh/Father, *hokmah, sophia, logos, ruach/ pneuma*. For me, this resembles the work of the big bang/ first cause.

Jesus of Nazareth, Incarnate Logos

Our portrayal of the biblical God gets yet more complex when we take up J

The data are clear enough—a baby was born, grew up, lived his life, was murdered, was resurrected. Meanings are far from clear. The Bible gives us interwoven dimensions to sort through. We find that Jes

First, Jesus enacts the policies of God. In the show-and-tell pattern, that's the "show."

Second, Jesus expresses counsel, in the form of universal wisdom, for how and-tell, that's the "tell."

But Jesus has another stratum. The evangelist John, as I said above, ident

And yet more in this figure. After Jesus dies in crucifixion and resurrects, we encounter the risen Christ, progenitor of the Body of Christ

Jocko Can Be Had

When I picked up my car keys, Jocko came running to find out whether he

When I pulled on the bad-
news suit jacket, I would called him into the kitchen to be confined, a
your-
heart long face, the mournful eyes, the droopy ears, slathering guilt c

That was the way it was until I made a small change in the routine. Afte
mand, “Jocko, sit.
Jocko, wait.” And Jocko would sit and wait,
drooling heavily, gazing at the biscuit. Then as I closed the door,
I would say, “All right!” and he would gobble it. After a few of these
n’t bother to come to the closet door. He got on his bed to wait for th
his friend for the easy gratification of one-
half a dog biscuit. That didn’t make a lot of sense.

It wasn’t as though he had given up enjoying a walk, or enjoying our compa
was just that the instant dog-
biscuit gratification had higher priority than the delayed gratification.

By the time Judy and I married,
I had absorbed the concept of God that prevailed in our culture. It was drav

pretty shallow with a stereotype of a white-
haired old Caucasian run- ning things.

It offered easy gratification—
no complexities, no mysteries, and no enigmas. No requirement to consic
Father, *hokmah*, *sophia*, *logos*, Jesus, or *ruach/pneuma*. No chal-
lenge to figure out how nonetheless agape could work in actual prac

Taking it all in is not easy. I can't look at it and just think, *Oh, of cour*

It's enough to make me yearn for that easier dog biscuit of a concept, the
fledged, multilevel God of the Bible, enigmatic, paradoxical, elusive,
ing.

Reflection, Discussion, and Further Quandaries

What are the attributes of your concept of God?

Fourth Quandary

RETRIEVAL SPIRITUALITY

What, We May Well Wonder, Makes Up Any Spirituality?

Chapter Eighteen

What Is Spirituality?

We've seen a good deal of Jocko
retrieving. Now it's time to explain the retrieval spirituality that he h

Jocko's Spirituality

Jocko had two yearnings: to eat everything edible and to fetch anything thrown. He found ultimate reality in whatever or whoever provided
for those yearnings. That reality was Judy and me: Judy fed him, and I thre
sons, I couldn't say. He deified

us. And what did Jocko do about his deities? He lived a life of fidelity to us
panionship, and fidelity to his food bowl.

Or, stated otherwise—
Jocko was committed to something beyond himself (Judy and me) and Jocl
ment; he lived it. So we could say that Jocko had a personal spirituality—central convictions and chosen practices. I suppose these were

"religious" in the sense that anything done faithfully and conscientiously is done "religiously."

Your Spirituality

Anyhow, your spirituality need not be religious as in believing in God going to church. Your deep convictions, which you "religiously" act upon and make an integral p ity. So, your spirituality will have, first, a set of convictions, commit ments, values, and principles that you freely affirm for yourself ("Wh iors that actualize those values ("What I do about it"). Here are two

A young mother may say, "It's vitally important to me to rear an honest child." This is her commitment to a conviction. It's different from think tinue, "So I find ways to show the difference between honest and dishonest." This is what she's doing about it. Taken together, these two staten

A man working in a large corporation may say, "As far as I'm concerned, the corporate world is a jungle in which the fittest survive and the others g petitor, I do it to him before he does it to me." That's part of his "spiritual" practice.

But, I hear the objection: these are not "spiritual," they're secular. I re — what they believe—

and what they do about them. Obviously this can get trivial. If you b

practices certainly is significant. Over time, it influences what sort of perso

So, spirituality: “Here I stand” and “Here I go.”

Reflection, Discussion, and Further Quandaries

Trying to decide “where I stand” and “where I’m going” can be a maj
ing his huge body upright, ears at attention, goofy smile, and tail sw

ing. Gangway! Beast coming through! He skids to a stop at the door.

Other dogs—son Alex’s or daughter Molly’s—
arrive at the doorway about the same time, so we might have eight or twel

All except Jocko, who also crashes out of the door onto the deck
but then stops, wheels around, and eyes me as if to say, “Yes? What next?”

Centrifugal force versus centripetal force. I reflect on centrifugal forces in o

I reflect on the centripetal forces, our yearnings for communion and

I grieve at the centrifugal forces that separate us, the disputes that threaten

My reading of the Gospels shows Jesus beckoning, gathering, and welcomi
centripetal. I think God's must be also.

I smack our tetherball and send it into centrifugal orbit around the p

What centrifugal forces in your life draw you outward? Where is out-
ward for you? What centripetal forces draw you inward? Where is inward
love-agape have, if any, on the centrifugal and centripetal forces
in your life?

Where do you stand? Where are you going, inward toward God, or outward

Chapter Nineteen

A Concept of God

It's time now to acknowledge that our two concepts of God are one. The tra
cal God. We move now to explore how these two attributes of the living Go

The Ecology of Jocko

On our deck, we keep a large pottery jar with a brim wide enough for Jocko

for Jocko's head to disappear as he tried to retrieve the throwing stick he ha
tom. He presented a comic vision so vivid that, after we stopped laughing,
—jarhead Jocko, headless Jocko, and Jocko-body alone.

From his neck down, I saw that Jocko's body consists of a skeletal structure, containing his digestive tract and anchoring his leg

bones together with their associated ligaments and muscles. It's all enc

Jocko Is to His Body as God Is to Transcendence

I could see an analogy between
Jocko's body (separate from his
head) and God's causation. Just as Jocko's body works efficiently, so

It's the power of interdependence, the multiplier that produces more effect

Jocko, Are You Still There?

Eventually Jocko gave up trying to withdraw his head while gripping the st

bound world, the stick-and-
head dimensions were larger by far than the head-
alone dimensions. I suppose he was running out of oxygen in that enclosed
emerge and breathe.

Jocko Is to His Head as God Is to Immanence

While Jocko staggered about taking on fresh air, I reflected on this head
—
his wants, needs, personality, character, and responses. To the extent

from the consciousness in his brain. His program—
smile, wag, beg, greet, eat, sleep, and fetch—
all got their signals from his brain.

Just so does the composite Godhead stay connected to us, interacting, prese

A Coalescence of Jocko

I considered the entire Jocko, his size twenty-
two neck fastening his head to his body. The head gets to command t
ing, and braking. The head gets to say, “Start your skid now, you foo

The Living God

I considered two interactive attributes of God: one, like Jocko's body,
ing these two attributes, we admire causation laying down things as

And we admire what we can imagine God saying through the plot of th
ation. I called you home, over and over, but you persisted, poor proc
gals, in squandering my love. Nonetheless, I did not condemn you or

And we glimpse the justice of God emerging from these two attrib-
utes—
one reckoning, the other beckoning. Both have the absolute power of God d
this paradox, we cannot possi-
bly understand how it works. We can only say, yes.

Hardwired for Love

One crisp fall morning, I decided to walk up a nearby suburban hill and to l

We approached the busy road. I pulled on my heavy gloves, cinched up his
handed grip on the handle. Battle stations. We got to the intersection. I com

Jonathan Bryan

sir. Down, you big lump." He looked at me with a goofy smile, comical
with the tennis balls bulging and tail wagging. Commuter traffic streamed b
nis balls kept him focused.

Then Jocko saw a cat sitting on the far curb. His retrieval genes kicked in. H

Cars were bearing down on us. Jocko got to choose because Jocko had 5,00
wheel drive, and high-traction treads. I did-
n't. He went for the tennis balls first. I went along, willy-
nilly. I heard horn blasts from some cars, tires braking from others.

After a while it all got sorted out. The cat had his amusement and walked o

It means that we came close to sudden death.
It also means that Jocko hasn't the good common sense to put survival ahe

There's a way of understanding Jesus—
so hardwired for love that if he's got to sacrifice everything
to invite us back, so be it. When you start to understand Jesus, you st
ball people rolling into the death-
dealing traffic even at the risk of personal life, Jesus's life, the life tha

Jocko Retrieves Things Out There as God Retrieves People Out There

The analogy gives us a starting place. God retrieves with the same ste
baked suburban asphalt, sharp gravel, or brambles); not giving up du

Things about Jocko's retrieval policy that I think do not parallel God's re
yes, but (unlike God) at some point running out of energy
and becoming a mere collapsed, panting beast; dropping the retriev
niously on the ground then prancing around, tossing them into the a

Jocko retrieves something so that he can retrieve it again. God intends the

The Most Important Difference

Here is the most important difference between Jocko's retrieval pol-
icy and God's retrieval policy: Jocko gives the thing to be retrieved no

I think God's retrieval policy is entirely different: God seeks us out, m
ion and coercing or bribing or scaring us till we come in. No, I think

Jonathan Bryan

get the invitation and we accept or decline. This policy leaves the responsib

So our choice, together with the personal responsibility for the consequences of our choice, remains ours and ours alone. Choose.

I Invite Jocko to Come In

Jocko always enjoyed riding in our flat-bottom boat, his front feet up on the sides, ears flapping in the wind, check

That wasn't half the fun, however, of actually going in the water. On a certain dawn, Jocko and I

ing up waves that had broken the ice into small, jagged floes. They lapped one another like miniature tectonic plates jumbled along the beach.

Jocko wasn't at all interested in this scientific simile or the wildness of the

I, however, had been reading about training Labradors. A well-
trained Lab will sit on command and wait, no matter what, until com-

manded to fetch. A well-trained Lab will also take guidance in
search- ing, like, “Go right!” or “Back this way!” or “C’mon in.”

I commanded, “Jocko, sit.” Jocko sat. He knew this hastened the throwing.

His mighty leap carried him over a floe, almost. He crashed onto it, skiddin
He paddled with strong rhythm, his great head swing-
ing back and forth searching out the errant wood.

Jocko’s eagerness presented him with a problem. Since he hadn’t waited

I grew much disquieted. I imagined that Jocko would, indeed, search the en

He looked tired. I issued a command, in a strong, calm voice designed to as
jawed. “C’mon, Jocko,” I called. I knew he heard me because his ears did th

With no physical control over the situation—
not that I had much to begin with—
all I could do was invite this beloved animal to come in from that leth

I considered going after him but then I considered hypothermia and l
beloved chil- dren, who are busy exercising their God-
given liberty, their free will, paddling around in the ice floes of an in
—
some not hearing, some hearing but otherwise occupied, some trying

God Invites Us to Come In

Since the living God of retrieval does not constrain our freedom of will, we
heavy burden of

responsibility on us, but that is both the beauty and the pain of living unde
ship
of our retrieval God. We get to choose. The constant in the equation i

Fortunately, Jocko did get tired of his obsession. He found a piece of floatin

a futile dive for it, coming up with the substitute stick only. Majestically he

Potomac River water, dropping the stick, and looking expectantly for…
another throw. He was back in communion with me.

Retrieval to Communion with God

The word communion is usually associated with the liturgical communion service in worship, but I'm using it here for a spiritual condition associated not with liturgy but with being in the spiritual presence of God.

It seems to me indisputable that we all suffer a measure of alienation from G able consequence of living. The biblical plot shows that God grieves our los to communion.

It appears to be an open-door policy. God evidently extends the invitation to communion unconditionally, leaving the decision up to us, indivi before the open door, deciding whether to accept or decline the invitation. You choose what you choose, I choose what I choo

Then we die. The invitation remains open. The invitation remains open as n

Accepting or Declining the Invitation after Death

What am I talking about, that a person dead could hear and respond to this

Each person has a certain reality, consisting of personhood—a distinctive identity— and a body to carry it in. God maintains a relation-

ship with every personhood from the first human being onward. In th
ues; it's a constant.

At death, the molecular body reverts to individual molecules, discon-
nected but not lost (the conservation of matter). The personhood con-
tinues existence, intact. Where? In nowhere, infinity. When? At no time, et

In our post-
mortal state, God continues the same loving relationship with us as before,
munion and constantly inviting us to communion. If a certain person's con
mortal life removes that barrier so that the personhood "hears" it and can r
—
accept or decline. I think the invitation is so strong that few decline.

This supposition about post-mortal continuation toward commun-
ion with God coordinates well with words in the Episcopal Book of Comm

This concept has two features: it affirms that God continues to invite us onw

Regarding those not competent to decide—the children, those men-
tally or physically ill-equipped to handle the concepts,
those who have never heard of any of this at all, including those who lived
—
I am confident that the living God will have a loving policy, a nonetheless p

Moreover, Jesus's parable tells us that the prodigal son, thoroughly alienate

accept and take responsibility for whatever consequences flowed from that

Jesus told this story to let us know how we are with God. It tells me that Go

This idea of retrieval springs partly from the meaning of the Bible when it i

munion, shalom.

It springs partly from Jesus's encounter with death that led to resurrection, for the resurrection itself serves as retrieval; that is, death al

ated the mortal Jesus from his people, his work, and his program. No

Anyhow, I like the idea of God's policy of retrieval. How it actually wo

Shalom

I have used the term communion to designate a condition close to Go

In the chapters regarding causation, the big bang, and transcendence, I said
rium, which corresponded to the ancient Hebrew concept of shalom.
I am willing to say that it also characterizes the end-
state, the end-
times, the last day, and the end of time. If God created our universe a
munion. In John's Gospel, Jesus's last word was *tetelesthai—*
it is fin- ished, completed, fulfilled, accomplished. Shalom.

God's Retrieval Policy during Mortal Life

That all applied to retrieval after death. I think it works just as much during
ion and resurrection.

Again, the prodigal son provides the template. We can interpret the death o
pret his return to a new and different condition as a resurrectional event, f

I am not talking about "things came out all right after all—
it rained on our picnic, but we saw a great movie instead." I am talking abo
substantial rearrangements in the spiritual condition.

For example, imagine what's going on in these statements: "After they faile
made some serious changes and found a new serenity and approach to life
tion and a new way to relate to each other." Those are modest everyday ex

I think God has built this dynamic into the universe, a potential orig-
inally loaded into the big bang to become a functioning reality.

To Summarize

What convictions emerge from all this? Personally, I keep trying to get a gr
bang origins and infinite potential, the tender love displayed
in the bib-
lical narrative, the optimism of the New Creation, and the attraction of fina

—well, it's overwhelming. Finding a worthy response looms as the next step in our retrieval spirituality.

Reflection, Discussion, and Further Quandaries

As you prepare to bridge from this long-winded analysis of how things are between God and us, perhaps some cold

One night Jocko was sleeping soundly on the kitchen floor just in front of t

carelessly pitched up there for temporary storage. Maybe vibration from th

Jocko opened his eyes to see a midnight snack. "Manna from heaven!" said he. And then he stood up, straightened himself into a

moral stance, and declared in perfect Lab-speak, “No, I
shall not avail myself of this unearned opportunity to gorge. This bread doe

When I woke up and recollected this dream sequence, I had a hearty laugh,
soever when it came to eating anything that came along, whether given, st

Just so do I cast a skeptical eye on the likelihood that the world will a
interest, dedication of self to the greater good, and centering one’s lif

Some people do actually live this way, do live lives of genuine, heart-
felt service. (Let me stipulate here that I am talking not about marquee live
like Mother
Theresa’s and Mahatma Ghandi’s, but the ordinary lives of ordinary folks, e
—venality, cruelty, selfishness, power-
grabbing, maliciousness, exploitation; it’s all there—
monumental alienation.

Nonetheless, I say again, opportunities to emulate the policies of God as ena

I think one habit of mind gets in my way, my habit of thinking about
jar. It’s my habit of governing my life by law
instead of grace. Of course I won’t try it if someone
is watching, and of course I can contrive some clever way of getting a
lates the policies of God enacted by Jesus. That sounds pretty high-
minded, but it also sounds adult.

The bar is set high. But it's a bar of grace, not law.

So, reflecting on all this and preparing to see what comes next in our retriev
think?

Perhaps you are reacting against my notion of nonetheless agape since it se

Chapter Twenty

Life in Retrieval Spirituality

One day I was trying to decide between a hard commitment and an easy do
—
food and retrieving. So, out on the deck I picked up a handful of Kibbles an
held both hands high, out of reach but not sight. He acted
frantic, leaping and woofing.

Then I did a cruel thing. I pitched the ball out into the yard. As he started t
he spied me putting the Kibbles onto the deck. He saw the ball rolling into
—fetch or eat?

He had free will. He could do either, but not both at once. Finally the Kibbl
easier, and swifter to gratify, won out. He inhaled them and headed for the
end of teasing out the meaning in it.

Jocko did not need the nourishment of those Kibbles. He was not starving.
distance with no strain, no cost, no investment, and no commitment. On th

Cheap Grace, Costly Grace

I have to choose, regularly, between the easy dodge and the hard con

Familiar words, always mouthed with deep sincerity and full-
strength rationale. I'm tired, I did some good stuff just last week; it's only t
grace good for if you can't enjoy it? Does the living God really express agap

In answer, I turn to the example of Dietrich Bonhoeffer, a German Lutheran
He became an influential voice for those who opposed the Nazi policies lea
1935, but then made a fateful decision by returning to Nazi Germany to co

If he had not made that decision, the Nazis could not have impris-
oned him in 1943, nor could they in 1945 have
hanged him by the neck until he was dead. But he did make that decision, a

The living God, wrote Pastor Bonhoeffer, freely offers boundless grace

When I think that God's grace will relieve me of responsibility and I deliber
but I do it anyhow because I also know that my friend forgives readily, I am
to comply with the law if the police have been laid
off and court is never in session?

Pastor Bonhoeffer urged costly grace—responding to the gift of gra-
cious love with gracious love, not taking advantage of it but emulating it. A

The Harder, Not Easier, Response

I recognize that this walk
through the quandaries has brought us to a concept of the living God that s
over, an indulgent figure with loose standards.

It may appear to be a gospel of affirmation, not transformation, presenting
plain that it is long on tolerance and short on accountability, or long on fo
tions salvation not at all, nor morality, and that it favors the

grace of God and God's love, ignoring the God of justice and God's wrath.

One could indeed decide that the object of life is to get away with as much

But one could also choose to live a harder way, a more demanding way, an
getting away with a lot, but there may be a better way, something like cost

Revisiting the Central Meaning of the Bible

In the chapter on finding the central meaning of the Bible, I concluded with this:

"Yes, God created all in equilibrium and yes,
humankind alienated themselves from God and one another, and yes, God r
love self…love neighbor. There it is. The gold standard. A biblical conclusion that can give direction to life. I could adopt it as my
own spiritual constitution."

But I get exasperated with unassailable generalities like that, especially pieties that look great but have no evident application. Let's revisit t

Living a God-Centered Life

How exactly will I love God…love self…
love neighbor? An answer emerges from a paraphrase of President Ke

One cultural spirituality treats God like a utilitarian godlet, a step-
n- fetch-
it gofer, the equivalent of those little Baals that so tempted the Israelites in

The alternative that attracts me asks not what I can get out of my relatio

It would dedicate to God my every thought, every judgment, every act, eve
on it until it does.

I state this not because it's my personal practice but because it is a concept
centered life," that I can aspire to. There's not a chance in this world that I

Responding to Grace with Grace

Just a note to emphasize what I said about Pastor Bonhoeffer—
that he urged us to respond to grace with grace, not exploitation. That mak

It would mean setting up some benchmarks for a nonetheless policy, such
win solu-
tions; expanding the circle of people included; trusting in God's econ
omy of abundance; and practicing compassion.

All of which adds up to emulating the God of perpetual creation and noneth
cut rules. It requires me to take personal responsibility for living with rigor

Farewell to Old Jocko

The morning of Monday, December 16, 2002, started with a grand sunrise
ground, where he had retrieved maybe seven million tennis balls, se

Over the weekend, he had stopped eating and was drinking only ice water l
a bit of chicken broth. The cancer bloated his midriff. He could
stand up and stagger outside to void but only with great diffi-
culty. Dr. Farrell, his wonderful veterinarian, had assured us over the past
to our house to save Jocko the discomfort of coming to
his office. Jocko's grave was ready in the woods behind our house.

So all was fulfilled. His life was complete, and he lay on his beloved bed, Ju
completed his presence among us.

Jonathan Bryan

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Only a dog, but a presence of four-
legged love, a constant of joy, of fidelity, of worship, and of friendshi
a walking, woofing metaphor for all that's decent about living
and loving.

I guess it's the fulfillment that speaks to me about December 16, 2002, and
ded in my memory. Jocko started life in the basement just below where he

vivre, appetite, and communication. He fulfilled these potentials in his year
giving potential.

Warps and Woofs

Just doing what came naturally, Jocko made a big difference to me. On our
worn trail, throwing sticks for him, sending him crashing through the thick

Our walking pattern resembled yarns on a loom: some yarns stretch top to b
worn path of conventional thoughts, the warp. Jocko retrieved my stick-
quandaries from the rough terrain of unconventional thought, the

woof. Thus did Jocko's woof-yarn weave over and under my warp-
yarn, his unconventional woof challenging my conventional warp until we
fabric called retrieval spirituality.

I like having a new thought woven out of old thoughts, transforming but no

Coalescence from Warp and Woof

I wish those who promote new approaches to church and political matters w
—

and vice versa. As it is, they try to settle the resulting disputes on the mode
butting heads and making end runs in desperate
efforts to reach a goal. When one side reaches the goal, the other side loses.

Why not behave that way, and try the model of the biceps and tri-
ceps. These are decidedly opposing muscles, arranged to work against each

arm up and the other can pull the arm down. Without both, my arms would
cover any useful solutions. The con- cept of coalescence—
two opposing

ideas merging the best of each to yield a new, improved
idea: that's what Jocko taught me—warp needs woof.

Jonathan Bryan

God Invites Us to Communion

I am moving toward my mortal end. So are you. In this life,
we can't possibly fulfill our potential to become fully human. Failure

Here is a
way to think about that idea. First, we have noted that God evidently work
first cause to install the poten-
tial for humankind to exist and for individual humans to be born and to liv

Second, I think that the trajectory of the Bible's plot demonstrates Go
ously comforting and troubling the thought may be when contrasted
conventional truisms.

So it doesn't seem to me that my death, the end of my mortality, will

For Jocko, yes. That was it for our old friend. He was just a beast, a terrifi

Not so for you and me. We
will continue, as God's beloved children, creations with potential to be fully
tion to communion—the great retrieval—will remain open.

For like tennis balls in the brambles or rotten sticks vanished under the Pot
—if we will.

God Seeks to Retrieve Us If We Will?

That
last thought sits there like any number of annoying religious assertions, unc

It's a story that will sound like a literal account of what actually hap-
pened, but I hear it emerging from my cloud of unknowing, from tha

And the preacher in me declares that this story is true in a transcen-
dent way, that it is a true account in mythic terms of
what its underlying historical events signify.

From Death to New Life, New Creation

Anyhow, here it is. At first it won't seem relevant to my idea that God seeks
certain springtime Friday during the Roman occupation of Jerus
walls on a
rocky promontory called Golgotha, the Place of the Skull, a
bloody cross stood, empty. Nearby lay the corpse of the man who ha

that cross, Jesus of Nazareth.

When he died, Jesus died dead. His mortal body ceased living. His brain wa
They had laid it in a cavity hewn from limestone rock resembling the mang

Friday

As to Friday. God, according to the myth, completed genesis (the begi
different accounts.

So when his mortal life ended,
the universe, which he had “birthed” at creation, died also. When the
day truth.)

To put this another way, on that Friday, the original creation that had come
thing, a void, returned to nothing, no-
thing, a void. When the incarnation of the Logos went down, all went down

Saturday

Saturday began, the seventh day of creation. All rested in sabbath-
time. Saturday ended.

Sunday

On Sunday, the first day of the new week, God did a new creation. A wha
animated the first of humankind. I want to say that the breath of God

dawn, did what the breath of God did originally, that is, create reality out o
before experienced life in Jesus resurrected.

We must linger a moment over this word resurrected. It emphatically does
thing all over again, from scratch, ex nihilo, from nothing, in a new and u

Jesus's molecules didn't reconstitute into Mary's human (and divine) child
—
they had been irretrievably deconstructed. They became, instead, resurrecte
urrected into a new creation. In God's once and only resurrection, Jesus be
—brand new, not refurbished—
creation. In the absolute void of the nothingness left when Jesus died dead
ated all things new. From the first day, the first Sunday of the old cre-
ation, we have gone to the next Sunday, the first day of the new creation.

and has never happened since.

Dare we stretch the image yet further to say that inside the tomb on that ne
Sunday occurred an expansion, a big bang? Remember that
in that original big bang in no place,
at no time and out of no thing, God set forth all creation—
manifest in physical form (time, space, energy, natural law, etc.) and
spiritual form (all concepts, all
potentials). In this big bang of resurrection, God set forth a new creation m

ical form (the body of the risen Christ) and spiritual form (the breath, the S

From the Body of Jesus to the Body of Christ

When the sun brought light in the east, the women went to the tomb to fini
searching to figure this out, was the Body of Christ. It
was, for those next few
days, his resurrection body, a transitional reality. The risen Christ took seve

Crucifixion, Resurrection: Hinge of History

It took me a long time to see the full significance of the story of cru-
cifixion and resurrection. I finally realized that it is the hinge of history: th

The Body of Christ

This breath of God, this Spirit of God, this *pneuma continued to enliven ther*

They eventually caught on that they had become a new creation, had had a

This, in turn, meant that they embodied the policies of God as Jesus had en
—steadfast love, faithful relationships, service to oth-

ers, care for the needy, and healing the
broken. In all ways they were to emulate the policies of God
that they had seen and heard in
Jesus. This meant that to keep this good news of new creation to themselve

They began to preach a gospel of hope and new life. Many people througho

Baptism in the Body of Christ

Baptism has at least two meanings: first, it replicates the Hebrews' exodus f
—
that is, it signifies death to the old life of alienation from God and bir

Second, baptism replicates Jesus's mortal death and resurrection into ne
— communion—
with a new way of life as a committed member of the Body of Christ,

The new Christian communities adopted these meanings of baptism to mak
initiation for new members of the Body. They also formulated a creedal affi
—the Apostles' Creed—as a stan-
dardized basis for belief. The problem that arises from this practice cen-
ters on the tendency to derive intricate doctrines from the simple

affirmations, which then engender divisions and broken unity. Unity was th

The Great Commission

The risen Christ did two things for his followers: he commissioned them to

The first small communities of new people gathered in the name of Christ
—
Christians. On Sunday mornings (the day of resurrection) they gathered and
—the essence of what Jesus had taught them about God's policies.

At first they called their eating together "agape meals." Soon, how-

ever, they considered them sacramental events that manifested the Christ p
rience, they began to call it by the Greek word for thanksgiving
— *eucharistia, the Eucharist. It became a way not only to experience the pre*
—unity with Christ and with one another.

Communion in the Eucharist projected itself into their everyday lives togeth

They identified themselves as the hands, voices, feet, and heart of God livin

Jesus had begun. It made them One Body, indivisible. Naturally, how-
ever, being human folk, they soon began to dispute. Paul had to write to th
tionalism. You are one in Christ. Do not, do not, divide the Body. (1 Cor. 1

Being the Body in Shalom

Against the background of the story of crucifixion, resurrection, new creatio
ure ways to do that.

As our mortal hearts and minds squirm and maneuver, our perplex-
ing problems and quandaries shift and grow. But a constant remains firmly
—
the living God beyond and within, creating anew, always creating. And und
ings, lies shalom, our origin, our potential, our destiny, the shalom of God.

Walking with Jocko

A few weeks after Jocko died that winter day, I walked our woods on an ov
off.
I slogged through the muck of mud, dead leaves, and rotten wood. Death, d

I missed my walking buddy. I could see him in vivid memory, the water
dog having a grand time, chasing his sticks through the bogs
and puddles, and lying down to wallow and lap icy water. In his great O-
be-

joyful-Jubilate-Jocko way, he saw not death, decay, and
brokenness, but life to live, fulfilling potential fully, doing what
he loved doing, being
a loyal companion, fretting not one minute in twelve years.

I called out to him, “What’s the deal, Jocko? Look at all these fallen and bro

I thought I could hear this big, gentle Lab say, “Your
problem is that you walk with
your eyes down. I know you want to see where you’re going, but
you ever see down there is the muck of mud and rotten wood and
mayed about climbing over these dead trees, and
you begin
to think that everything in the woods is dead or dying or rotten. Rai

Then in my imagination, I watched him
return to his obsession, trot-
ting up and down in the muddy stream bed, collecting dead sticks.

I trudged on through the muck but now not so fast, so I
could notice a few buds starting to swell, feel the first hint of spring air, and

A Last Word

A few years ago I wanted to draw together my thoughts into a little hymn f
sing. So I wrote the following verses that summarize how
I feel about my idea that nonetheless, God retrieves us.

Dear gracious God, we lift our hearts in grateful worship-love

for all the gifts your grace imparts to lift our souls above.

Creator God, we dedicate our lives entire to you

to serve, to give, to celebrate creation now anew.

Incarnate God, we gather here in bonded covenant,

as Christ's own Body to revere your presence jubilant.

Show us, we pray, your way of cross, Your way of loving grace,

Teach us forgiveness and hard loss To gain shalom's embrace.

Guide us to serve, to love, to give; guide us to sacrifice;

guide us to die and rise to live at resurrection's price.

We seek to grow, O yeasty Lord, through your own Spirit strong, into our C

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